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Integrity and its Puzzles

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Integrity and its Puzzles

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Praising someone as a person of integrity is a sign of great respect. But why do we do so? And why do we aspire to integrity? There are several puzzles about the virtue of integrity. The first has to do with constancy and change. On the one hand, we tend to choose as exemplars of integrity those who remain firm in their commitments in the face of some kind of significant test or temptation. For example, we might be inclined to praise the integrity of an underpaid inspector who refuses to accept a large bribe in order to overlook shoddy construction, or of an academic who maintains consistently high standards in voting on tenure cases, even when a good friend is likely to be denied tenure. On the other hand, we also praise as persons of integrity individuals who have broken off a longstanding commitment—for instance, a woman who has long proclaimed her commitment to marriage as a lifelong bond of fidelity, but who leaves her husband when he pressures her to cover up the fact that he is embezzling funds from his company. How can we consider integrity to be bound up on the one hand with maintaining commitments and on the other hand with a readiness to change commitments?

The second puzzle has to do with the fact that integrity is a virtue we often grant to persons whom we consider to have made the wrong commitments. For instance, an abortion rights activist might say of a pro-life politician, “Well, I do respect her as a person of great integrity; she knew that she would most likely not secure re-election given the unpopularity of her stance, but she did not try to curry favor with voters.” We can resolve these puzzles at the theoretical level by articulating a sufficiently nuanced account of the virtue of integrity. Theoretical resolution still leaves us, of course, with the practical challenges that attend cultivating the virtue of integrity.

Integrity is not simply a matter of remaining true to one’s commitments. It is also a matter of being committed to having commitments that are genuinely good, and that are well-ordered in relation to one another. This means that integrity is not just a matter of fidelity come what may, but of being willing to revise or re-order one’s commitments in light of evidence that they are flawed or badly ordered. Integrity is distinct from dogmatism or

rigidity; it is appropriately cognizant of human fallibility and limitation. Also, because integrity is a matter of seeking to cultivate and act consistently in accordance with genuinely good commitments, it leaves room for error: we do recognize the integrity of some persons whom we take to have wrong or bad commitments. We would not, though, recognize someone like a consistently evil sadist as a person of integrity; we must somehow be able to make sense of a person as committed to something intelligibly good (even if we judge this good to be misperceived in some way) in order to praise her integrity. To respect the integrity of someone with whom one disagrees is to recognize moral complexity and the fact that honest disagreement is possible.

These reflections suggest that the cultivation of integrity is likely to be the task of a lifetime. We learn how to act well in distinct roles, relationships, and contexts, and then have to learn how these relate to one another. We learn as children, for instance, that friends are supportive of one another and do not expose one another to the ridicule of others, and we must determine how this commitment is to be honored in the face of the requirement to be truthful. Should I tell the teacher that my friend was the one who knocked over the teacher's potted plant? Learning how our various commitments can be reconciled and ordered across domains is no easy matter, even when challenges and temptations are pint-sized. The challenges multiply as agents operate across a wider range of social contexts and with a broader range for choice and initiative. It is perhaps for this reason that integrity seems a particularly prominent modern virtue.

How can we go about cultivating integrity? Reflectiveness helps: we will be better able to maintain our commitments if we are clear about what they are, and about how they relate to one another. Is it a betrayal of friendship to vote negatively on a friend's tenure case? Or would it rather be a betrayal of friendship to pretend to anyone, including the friend, that his research meets standards that in fact it fails to meet? (Of course, one might build increasing levels of complexity into such a case: perhaps there was a failure of friendship, if not of integrity, here. Maybe the friendship required at some earlier point in the story the kind of deep engagement with the friend's research program that might have allowed it to flourish.)

Often, we become aware of potential conflicts or challenges to our commitments only in the course of experience. Agonies of indecision are an indication that our commitments are not clearly articulated or clearly ordered, and thus an opening for reflection that might move us toward greater integrity. A painfully keen sense of a particular instance in which one has failed to display integrity may offer an important occasion for the cultivation of integrity, insofar as it elicits dissatisfaction with the state of one's commitments or one's adherence to them, and focused reflection on the nature of the failure.

But learning does not come solely through failure: contemplating inspiring exemplars of integrity can also play an important role, enabling agents imaginatively to enact the sort of painful losses integrity can require, while also imaginatively grasping the intrinsic goods that are made available by acting with integrity when tested or tempted. Indeed, being able to recognize and admire persons who enact the kind of stable yet open and self-critical commitment that characterizes integrity can powerfully re-orient our emotion-

al lives, such that goods we might once have found too enticing to resist no longer tempt us. At a most basic level, the virtue of integrity itself exerts a magnetic pull over us because to the extent that we possess integrity we are more fully ourselves, more able to construct a coherent narrative of our doing and being in the world.

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